

Chilka Lake: A Pilot Survey for Banding Possibilities

BY

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The Bombay Natural History Society's Party detailed to survey the Chilka area for banding possibilities was rather hurriedly composed in the month of December 1965 and consisted of Shekar of the Society's staff, Kishore Kadiwar a young and enthusiastic naturalist from Rajkumar College taken along by me, and myself. We assembled a few minutes before departure time of the Secunderabad Express at Victoria Terminus. Somehow, our enterprising travel agents got us the necessary seats and the last of the gear was stowed away just as the train pulled away from the platform. It was Christmas Day and the rush of people considerable at this otherwise normally crowded station.

The train journey from Bombay to Poona has always been my favourite; the clean and efficient electric engines make it a habit of speeding across the low coastal plain to the foot of the Western Ghats. The mountain section is slow but not at all trying as an everchanging panorama of escarpments and deep forested gorges provide a thrilling and everchanging view. It was good to once again see the arrogant curve of the 'Duke's Nose' rising above Khandala and momentarily I was transported to its top as I thought of the time two years previously when I had sat on the very edge of the proud profile.

From Lonavla to Poona the countryside assumes a typically Saurashtrian appearance so characteristic of the Black-cotton soil areas and I listed many of the common birds familiar at Rajkot as we speeded past the small farmsteads and groves of trees. Beyond Poona the ubiquitous steam engine took over and we puffed away into the dusk through well irrigated land bearing wheat, sugarcane, and alfa-alfa. I missed the Deccan as we arrived at Hyderabad early on the 26th morning. A day's stay was necessary as the connecting train for Orissa left in the afternoon. We utilised the time in going over the famous Salarjung Museum and bird watching in the attractively laid out public gardens stretching between the station and the Vidhan Sabha.

The section between Hyderabad and Rajamundry on the north bank of the Godavari was also covered under cloak of night and I was able to see little of the country, though I expect I missed little as much should be

arid and I expect scenically uninteresting. The Godavari Delta region was pleasing country, green, well cultivated and populous. Here there was an obvious demonstration of Man at harmony with Nature. People looked well fed, there were fine cattle and despite the human affluence, the trees and other vegetation around the stands of sugarcane and rice stubble were not mutilated. The fuzzy toddy palms lent a peculiar character to the scene. Around Bombay these palms look depressing, but here they have full crowns and were most attractive. Birdlife was plentiful and I expect there should be many roosts of wagtails in the sugarcane plots.

From Rajamundry upto Vizianagaram, where the night once again overtook us, the entire east coastal plain revealed a beautiful aspect. Sugarcane, golden rice stubble, thick stands of coconuts, rows of toddy palms, and closely ranked casuarinas all made a rich pastoral view, offsetting a distant panorama of high blue and tangled mountains of one of India's last great forests, the Dandakaranya. It was lovely country and birdlife was plentiful as could well be expected.

It was somewhere in the middle of the 27th night that the sleepy station of Balugaon saw us bundle out of the train. The entire platform was deserted except for the three of us and the Forest Range Officer deputed to receive us. I sleepily wondered why ever should the train stop at this place at all; Pilot Survey Parties could not be that frequent. A wet breeze blew through a large banyan tree outside the station and limpid stars were reflected in water alongside the road—dimmed imaginations conjured up a limitless expanse of water crowded with waterfowl and skeins darkening the skies overhead—a Pinkheaded Duck among them . . .

28th December. Mr. Rath, the aforestation D.F.O., stowed our luggage and us into two jeeps and we set off for our destination on the SE. edge of the lake. Till Rambha, we travelled along the Madras-Calcutta highway shaded by large trees many of them ancient banyans. The road skirted the sea-like Chilka. The country side had a picture postcard quality and a cool morning breeze blew from the blue mountains to our right. There were few birds apparent, and the lake itself was totally devoid of any waterfowl.

A little beyond Rambha we turned off the road on to a red dirt track and after winding through low scrub-covered hills we came out on to a vast flat expanse of wet grass and salt marshes at the southern end of the lake. There was much water in the roadside ditches, and long muddy inlets of the lake cut across them. The scene now abruptly changed; there were waders and ducks everywhere and, on one large bay of the lake, I was thrilled to see rafts of Pintail and Brahminies unconcernedly drifting close to lines of fish traps. This was fine unspoilt country indeed.

Soon we came onto the sandy flats which continue as a string of dunes to cut off the lake water from the sea. Here were thick stands of casuarinas and cashew trees. This narrow tongue of sand is broken by a single inlet of the sea through which the tide waters enter the lake and the many fish of the Chilka have access to the sea. Between the outer dunes and the body of the lake is a labyrinth of large low-lying islands and water channels. Our hope of coming across large congregations of birds centred on this complex and in this we were disappointed, as the further we proceeded along the dune, the number of birds became less and less and, except for one broad inlet where a great mass of shovellers rose on our arrival, we saw fewer birds in density than might be expected on any winter day on the lakes at Rajkot. Here a duck trapper had a pair of female shovellers and, as they were in good condition, I had them purchased for subsequent ringing and releasing, though other members of our convoy pressed to wring their necks instead. It was suggested we engage him and a few others of his tribe to catch birds for us, but he hardly appeared efficient and the number of birds did not justify making any optimistic arrangements. Despite the paucity of birds, I greatly enjoyed the drive as the freshness of the air and the lovely surroundings were in themselves worth experiencing. It was about 2.00 p.m. when we skirted the last bay and drew up beside two dug-outs with mat sails tied to stakes on the grassy verge. In these we crossed the furlong-wide channel to Barhampur Island which was selected as our headquarters for the survey. The water was crystal clear and nowhere deeper than four feet. The floor was covered by a thick mat of green water plants, but of birdlife there was a singular absence. Two Lesser Egrets and some Ringed Plovers waded along the water margin, and over the grass small flocks of Grey Plovers ran about looking for insects. Two Gadwall swam out in the water to our left. Nothing could have been less exciting. Shekar was disgusted, but I have given up getting disappointed as Dr. Longstaff's advice to Himalayan travellers has long been a part of my general outlook on life, and I make it a point to 'live in the present' and the present in such lovely country was infinitely charming.

The Forest Ranger's hut placed at our disposal was a structure of clean whitewashed adobe walls and thickly thatched roof standing on the northern shore of the island. It was separated from the water by a broad sward of grass, and surrounded by small rice fields, now in stubble, enclosed by earth bunds planted with screw-pine hedges and small wind-swept banyans and cashew trees. The bird population was composed of a scattered group of Ringed, and Grey plovers on the ground, a pair of Redvented Bulbuls, and a rabble of Whitethroated Munias in the hedges, while a Pied Bushchat cock and some Pied Mynas inhabited the small compound of the hut. These then were the surroundings and birdlife of

the Headquarters of the Survey Party for possibilities of ringing thousands of waterfowl!

29th December. After a late breakfast, Mr. Rath decided to take me in a larger dug-out to have a look at the birds reputed to be in large throngs on the mud surrounding the Barnikuda Island and this would also give us an idea of the congregation of birds, if any, on the main lake. Shekar elected to stay behind to string up a few nets along the water's edge in an attempt to get some of the Grey Plovers running about. The brawny boatmen poled us across the shallow waters nowhere deeper than seven feet and when we were well out in the channel and got the full force of the breeze, they unfurled their mat-sail and at a leisurely pace we headed for a narrow channel between Barnikuda and Noapara islands. The amount of birdlife increased and we passed rafts of Pochards and, closer in to land where they could upturn to reach the weeds, Pintail and Gadwall. On the flats, Brahminy Duck in droves grazed placidly. I have never seen so many of them and at such close quarters except in Tibet. There were many Stints of both species, Lesser Sand Plovers, Grey Plovers, and a large flock of Blacktailed Godwits. The variety of waders one sees on the Saurashtra coasts was lacking. A pair of Whitebellied Sea Eagles soared overhead and they had a huge stick nest in a large banyan on the water-edge of Noapara Island. I was brought a downy eaglet by one of the little boys, who apparently went up to the eyrie frequently and once retrieved a duck brought in by the great birds!

Circling the island to the north, I got a view of large concentrations of duck, and in the distance flocks of flamingos made a pink line above the shimmering water. All this concentration was to the west and I resolved to have a closer look at the islands as soon as possible. Our return to camp was uneventful and a brisk sea breeze carried us to a late lunch and a disappointed Shekar who was just in time to take down the nets as a couple of young water buffalos started taking interest in the quality of material used in the new 'fishing-net'.

It was quite apparent that if we wanted to achieve anything, we would have to abandon our idea of returning to Barhampur each evening and setting off the next morning in the boat, as our pace was too slow and we would not be able to cover much area of the islands. My resolve was finalized to spend nights either in the dug-out, or under the stars wherever we touched land at sundown.

The evening was one of intense beauty as a setting sun shed its golden rays on wide expanses of blue water and distant mountains across the lake. A skein of Pintail headed across the green sky towards the sea.

30th December. We accompanied Mr. Rath to the jeeps and saw them off. After the party left, we crossed the dunes through dense

casuarinas to the main sea. The water was clear, and the sand shelved steeply into the green depths. I was struck by the absence of sails along the horizon and it was apparent that coastal traffic was not as well developed as on the western coast.

On return to the rest house, we assembled all our gear and after a hurried lunch, we stowed things into the canoe and set off on our voyage of discovery. It was late afternoon and a stiff sea breeze drove us round the northern edge of Barhampur Island to the entrance of the Noapara channel. This circuit would give us a view into the channel between the islands and the main dune giving us an idea of conditions all the way to Titipo where on our way in we had seen large flocks of shovellers. The main channel and the narrow one into which we turned were devoid of much birdlife and it was again with a sense of nagging doubt that we moored at dusk and settled in for the night, the matting sail spread over the canoe to protect us from night dampness. The pink light of sunset faded to reveal lustrous stars reflected in placid waters and isolated pairs of Brahminy Ducks called to each other in resonant honks, while a few Brownheaded Gulls floated like phantoms on the glassy surface.

31st December. The channel further narrowed and at its narrowest, a cane pallisade cut it off with a couple of fish traps at one end. It was a lovely morning and gulls and Brahminy Ducks floating on the water made attractive pictures. Near the gate in the fish corral, we again grounded our boat and while the boatman went into the village to look for a reputed trapper and fetch some milk, we strolled along the waterside turf under curious but friendly gaze of muscular young fisherlads and watched a medley of common birds; Common Swallows were in numbers and, from the droppings around a large banyan, it was clear they had been roosting there. In a hedge below were a pair of Dhayal, a male Black Redstart, and flocks of Redvented Bulbul. The banyan was alive with Greyheaded Mynas, White-eyes, and high in its great crown was an immense platform of branches and twigs, the home of a majestic pair of Sea Eagles.

The trapper was away and so we pushed off, helped through the narrow passage by the bronzed youths and waved away by a young teacher from the village school who had joined us in our morning amble.

The muddy shores widened into broad flats and expanses of shallow water. Ahead stretched another corral beyond which lay the lake itself. The binoculars revealed an astonishing sight of throngs of waterfowl. Pintail, Gadwall, Wigeon, Common Pochards, and Brahminy Duck placidly floating on the water. To the south the concourse stretched into the hazy distance where a mass of pink proclaimed the presence of a multitude of flamingos. The entire afternoon was sailed parallel to the coast towards Krishnaprashad, and all along the shore were the

teeming multitudes. The flamingos were breath-takingly spectacular. It was indeed a memorable day worth all the distance of travel and the days of disappointment.

The reason why we had not come to know the great concentration of duck was clear. The birds rested and fed in the same area. In the shallows, an upending duck got all it needed from the lake bottom and further out the diving duck got easy fare. On all sides, the rice stubble was too dry and devoid of food for the duck to be attracted off the water, hence the total absence of feeding flights which are such spectacular and familiar sights at Bharatpur. All the ducks were out in the water, and I doubted the efficiency of the netters in harvesting the throngs for us.

That evening we moored beside two other boats off Krishna-prashad and turned in for the night, having accepted the ranking of Chilka among the waterfowl paradises in the country, and the boatmen promising greater sights on the morrow when we arrived at Nalbano Island in the middle of the lake.

1st January. The golden light of the New Year awoke us to a thrilling spectacle of flamingos (Lesser) flying in wavering skeins towards the fabled isle. I was reminded of the early dawn at Nir years ago when we had visited the Flamingo City in the Great Rann of Kutch. A flock of Little Cormorants followed the Flamingos and, among the Brahminy Duck, a group of twelve Shelducks swam past. After an early meal, which was to serve as breakfast and lunch combined, we set course in the direction the flamingos and cormorants had taken, and soon the trees of Krishnaprashad were dimmed in the haze. On the body of the lake itself there were no ducks and the interminable expanses of water and sky and a warm sun overhead induced an amnesia followed by a pleasant drowsiness.

At around noon, I bestirred myself and looked over the gunwale of our 'warship' and what I saw startled me into wakefulness. There ahead of us lay flocks of Pochards and, as we approached a low line of fish corrals which encircled the island, their multitudes became denser and denser. What astonished me more than the number of the birds was the vast pallisade of canes which encircled the entire island like a fortification.

The whole island is submerged under several feet of water in the rains, the fish come to feed and spawn in the shallow, weed-grown place. Before the level of the water falls, this great pallisade is put up by various villages; the island itself is divided into four compartments. As the water level further drops, the weeds are exposed. In fact at the time of our visit there was no dry land. The drying waters expose the fish which are easily captured. This provides, as can be imagined, an ideal feeding ground for duck, geese, flamingos, and Spotted Sandpipers. Great eagles arrive to take the pickings, and on one low em-

bankment I saw an assemblage of 2 Pallas's Fishing Eagles, 3 White-bellied Sea Eagles, 1 Tawny Eagle, a couple of Ospreys, and several Brahminy Kites, while overhead in constant flight were Blackeared Kites, Whiskered Terns, Blackheaded Gulls, and Common Swallows.

Immense flocks of Shoveller, Pintail, Wigeon, and Gadwall fed in the grass and a large flock of Lesser Flamingos rose in a pink haze to the sound of a shot-gun as some shikaris entered the defences of the island in a dug-out. A small flock of 15 Greylags took flight with much gagging. The afternoon was memorable as we waded through the squelching plants, mud, and black ooze. The site was indeed ideal for future ringing operations. That night we slept in the boat after moving out into the lake out of reach of an odious stench set free by the rotting material and bird droppings. We planned a further foray next morning into the marsh.

2nd January. During the night a strong easterly wind began to blow, and in the pale light of dawn I was horrified to see a pale film of cloud overhead, and thick clouds banked the horizon out to sea. 'We end our work on the lake, Shekar', I said and told the men to get us as fast as the gusty wind would take us across the lake to Balugaon. Quite obviously this was a cyclone and I did not fancy getting involved in high wind, waves, and heavy rain under inadequate shelter, rations in their last doles, and valuable cameras and books getting a soaking. So, we hoisted our picturesque but inefficient rattan sail and headed for a steep promontory near which was Balugaon landing. The gales grew intense and the high waves transformed the Chilka into a miniature sea. The dug-out raced forward and by 11.30 a.m. we reached Balugaon. That evening the storm struck with violent intensity. The grey clouds lowered and a deluge poured violently through the night. I was thankful I had abandoned the venture and talking things over with Shekar, I felt it would be correct to start operations in a planned way next season, and as he was to accompany Dr. Salim Ali to Bhutan in the summer, he should return to Bombay with me.

3rd January. Dawned weak and wet. The rain continued well into the afternoon and it was only at sundown that the storm clouds receded in a glory of gold and orange skies above the fine blue hills. On the way back, we saw ample testimony of the cyclone's velocity in flattened sugarcane and jute; the great winds, the papers told us, had struck the entire east coast from Orissa to the Krishna Delta.

In conclusion I would like to recommend a ringing project centred at Noapara, with tents to live in. Two boats, one large which could be used for spending nights at the island and a smaller one with an outboard motor for quick transport of personnel and equipment from one halting centre to another. The trappers could

operate from the large dug-out stationed at the island, the smaller craft bringing in the nightly catches each morning to the central camp. In this manner, a 15-day camp should yield fine bags. The ringing party should travel together from Bombay to Balugaon where prior arrangement of hiring boats etc. should be made through the Forest Department. Apart from the help in hiring craft and engaging men, the Society's party should be self-reliant.

There was a suggestion we engage local trappers, but I consider this unsound policy as our work should not encourage netting which subsequently might provide a lucrative occupation at the expense of the birds. There appears to be a good market for trapped duck around Chilka, now one of the sought-after tourist attractions, accessible overnight from Calcutta.

The Nalbano Island could well be declared a sanctuary for ducks. Its pallsades provide easy protection from marauding guns. Supervision would be easy. Shooting around the lake should not be restricted, however. Chilka properly managed is not only ideal for ringing operations, but could well be one of India's star tourist attractions.

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